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David CHAN

Singapore Management University, davidchan@smu.edu.sg

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By Invitation

Too much of a good thing – when virtue becomes vice

The art of self-reflection prevents strengths from becoming self-defeating weaknesses



David Chan

For The Straits Times

It may be over-exercising, eating a favourite dish too often or being on a long boat cruise – we know and feel it when we have “too much of a good thing”. This is that experience of something good becoming bad when the amount is excessive or when we do too much of it.

Too much of a desirable thing that is otherwise enjoyable or beneficial can end up in unpleasant experiences, even harmful consequences. Not just in exercise, food and travel, but also in daily situations. Keep making your password more complex to increase security and you end up having difficulty accessing your computer. Or think about what happens when you spend too much time with your partner.

In these situations, the unpleasant experience is personal and immediate, although others interacting with us may know about it only later, or if we tell them about it.

But there is another set of actions that we engage in, with excessive good becoming bad, which others see immediately. And they see it much more clearly than we do, if we eventually realise it at all. These are actions we exhibit from having too much of a positive attribute, or a positive attitude. Put simply, when our virtue becomes vice.

POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES BECOMING NEGATIVE

We categorise personal attributes into good versus bad. We value self-confidence and discourage self-doubt. We say be conscientious, not careless. And we take pride in courage and dispraise

cowardice. But when confidence, conscientiousness or courage overflows, we become maladaptive.

When people are overconfident, they often do too much. Someone overconfident about his public speaking skills will overestimate the audience’s interest in what he has to say, and their positive impression of his delivery. The speech then goes on longer than necessary, offering more arguments than needed, with more illustrations than planned. The overconfidence is self-defeating – the goal to persuade or awe the audience is not achieved. It may even backfire.

Conscientiousness is another positive attribute we can have too much of. A conscientious person not only puts in effort, he attends to details and perseveres despite slow or even no progress. But when someone is excessively conscientious, what should be a meticulous action becomes obsessive-compulsive behaviour.

And when there are good reasons to stop, his dogged determination to persevere on the same course is stubborn behaviour, a failure to adapt.

The courage to speak the unpleasant truth or speak up against unfairness is a positive attribute. Courage is all the more precious when the cost of speaking up is high.

But too much courage hurts more than helps. It can cause someone to have little or no inhibition in expressing and explicating whatever is in one’s mind. It becomes impulsivity, maladaptive forthrightness and poor situational judgment ability.

Now and then, we may be too conscientious or too courageous. But it is overconfidence that everyone should pay more attention to, because it is the most prevalent.

OVERCONFIDENCE AND OPTIMISM BIAS

Overconfidence is ubiquitous when people make judgments and decisions.

In numerous studies on confidence, conducted in different cultures using diverse tasks, participants were asked to rate how good they think they are, either in absolute terms or relative to others.

Invariably, be it driving skills or teaching performance, the results show that the large majority of participants – often close to 80 per cent – believe they are better than



the median. This is statistically impossible because objectively only 50 per cent of the sample are above the median score.

Research also shows people are overconfident about the accuracy of their forecasts, whether it is predicting the stock market performance or their firm’s profits.

There is a substantial gap between what people think they know and what they actually know. Research shows that this disconnect between self-belief and reality is larger for people with higher academic achievements, experts in various fields, and those in positions of authority and power.

Confirmatory bias is the human tendency to selectively seek out information to confirm one’s preconceived belief or position. If it is the mother of all biases, then overconfidence is the father.

Together, these two biases have given birth to a host of other cognitive biases that pervade human judgment and decision-making.

For example, overconfidence produces optimism bias. This is the tendency to expect positive futures regardless of evidence and logic. Optimism bias is maladaptive. It is an unrealistic belief and hope that a future outcome will be positive, when such a future is implausible.

By self-reflecting, we figure out what to do, and when and how to pursue a course of action. It involves asking ourselves what is the issue at hand and its practical context, when to apply which positive attribute or attitude, who are the people involved, and how we can do things better.

Optimism bias in planning can have serious negative consequences. Bad predictions and, therefore, decisions can lead to large investment losses, underused public infrastructure or not-so-smart cities that are not resilient to cyber-security crises.

WHEN A POSITIVE ATTITUDE IS EXCESSIVE

We can also be excessive in our positive attitudes towards others. Take trust, for instance. High trust can be mistrust – trusting when we should not.

The consequences can be disastrous when we have extremely high trust in people who are not trustworthy, especially when you trust not just in someone’s competence, but also their integrity and benevolence when these are absent.

When trust level is excessively high, we do not question claims and assumptions, nor ask for facts and supporting evidence. And transparency and accountability are not on our mind. All these make us highly vulnerable to exploitation when we mistrust manipulative characters.

Contrary to popular discourse on trust, distrust – which simply means low trust – is not always a bad thing. But the best antidote to being overly trusting is not to embrace destructive cynicism. Instead, develop a healthy scepticism.

This is a mindset of critical thinking like that of a good scientist – rationally questioning assumptions and objectively evaluating claims, giving priority to facts and evidence.

Another positive attitude that can become excessive occurs when people work together in a team. We use the term “team player” to compliment a member who agrees with the rest of the team or compromises his position to achieve group consensus. And we

call the one who does not go along with the team a disagreeable or dogmatic individual.

Normally, an agreeable attitude helps team functioning. It maintains harmonious relations among members and builds group cohesion, and these contribute to team morale and performance.

But we know from the research on teams, and also many real-life examples in business and politics, that too much value placed on agreement and group consensus will lead to groupthink. This is the phenomenon where a highly cohesive team makes bad decisions because team members withheld dissenting views to go along with majority opinion.

In groupthink, members agree and do not express a different view due to pressures to conform or maintain social harmony.

Groupthink happens most often in teams that value consensus and cohesion. And also when the team climate either forces or nudges members to keep quiet, agree with the leader and senior team members or express only views that they think those in power want to hear.

SELF-REFLECT, TAKE CONSTRUCTIVE STEPS

If virtue can become vice, how can one take steps to still value virtue and do good?

Clearly, we should not pretend that we do not have those positive attributes and attitudes – that will be false modesty. What we need is to know our limits, so that we can do better with our virtues.

Knowing our limits means knowing when to stop or pause, well before our positive attribute or attitude crosses the limit and becomes negative. This, however, does not call for moderation or a limiting restraint, like in exercising and eating. Instead, what is required is a self-reflection process. By self-reflecting, we figure out

what to do, and when and how to pursue a course of action. It involves asking ourselves what is the issue at hand and its practical context, when to apply which positive attribute or attitude, who the people involved are, and how we can do things better.

For example, the answer to preventing overconfidence and optimism bias is not to moderate by reducing confidence and optimism. We cannot be effective problem solvers if we encourage self-doubt and pessimism, which are themselves maladaptive. Instead, self-reflect and take steps to behave constructively.

How might this process look like? Back to my example on overconfidence in public speaking skills. Unfamiliar with the topic of your speech? Then plan your content and delivery. Humble yourself to seek input from knowledgeable others. Remember that you actually know less than you thought.

If the topic is familiar, decide which key points to share and stick to them during delivery.

Beware of the tendency to exhibit your knowledge by bringing up more information and illustrations than planned. Otherwise, you will find it difficult to keep to the time, disrupting the programme and annoying everyone. Not only that, your well-intended detailed accounts may come across as incessant and tiresome at best, and condescending at worst.

Which is why it is important to know your audience. No one likes an arrogant speaker, but a well-informed and knowledgeable audience gets most riled up when it perceives patronising superiority. Even more so if its members were not there by volition to listen to you.

Ignorance plus arrogance may make one a target of gossip and the butt of jokes. The power of negativity bias can amplify the criticisms as they multiply. This leads to a negative spiral of reactions and evaluations, never mind that such a response is objectively unfair to the one targeted. So, put simply, understand people’s emotions and what they may experience, and learn to see things from another’s perspective. Finally, after each speech, seek feedback from people likely to tell you the truth, especially those who do not share your background or viewpoints. Spend less time with those who agree with you on everything.

We can extrapolate this example on public speaking to other areas and virtues.

In sum, my point in this essay is a simple one. It does not matter who you are – all of us need to guard against the perils of excessiveness. When we self-reflect and consciously take constructive steps, we can prevent the negatives that result from having too much of a good thing.

When we can stop virtue from becoming vice, then we can develop positive attributes and attitudes to make a positive difference for ourselves and to the lives of others.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• David Chan is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute and professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University.